

Corona Look of the Day: Social Media Posts About Disabled Beauty and Resistance in the Time of COVID-19

by Sara Palmer and Bethany Stevens | Issue 12.1 (Spring 2023), Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry

ABSTRACT The authors created a photo and essay series entitled "Corona Look of the Day." Each day we took photos of outfits paired with colorful makeup and inspired text descriptions about the beauty in disability. These posts were formulated as resistance to the eugenic discourse pervading the early days of the pandemic that argued disabled and elderly deaths were acceptable and probable. In contrast to this bleak assessment, this artistic series sought to affirm disability through uplifting portraiture.

KEYWORDS disability, photography, COVID-19, beauty, Instagram

Project Description, Origin Story, and Purpose

During the pre-vaccine period of the COVID-19 pandemic, we—Bethany Stevens and Sara Palmer—created a photo and essay series entitled "Corona Look of the Day." Each day, Bethany created artful outfits, paired with colorful makeup and inspired text descriptions. These descriptions worked as lessons on how to view and appreciate the disabled body during a time when eugenic discourse was pervading the globe. The poses of Bethany's disabled embodiment staring defiantly at the viewer expressed resistance to the isolated days filled with fear of death. Many people publicly expressed that only disabled and elderly people would suffer in the pandemic as if that was supposed to be a good thing, and this project claimed the beauty of disability in response to such violent devaluation of our existence.

A significant draw of the project was the effort to put disability in an atypical social context—that of luxury and style. There is a certain agency that we can express through makeup and fashion. In doing this project, we also learned a lot about how to pose and work a camera. In this way, we countered a prevailing social assumption that disabled people are not fashionable, that we are focused only on comfort over style. Similarly, seeing someone

like disabled model and actor Jillian Mercado model for mainstream brands changes the game for the ways we can demand to be viewed.

We wanted to present something beautiful, stylish, and with a heavy dose of attitude. And people tuned in. We accrued many followers on social media who commented on how the posts shaped their day for the better. Many came to rely on the images to help uplift their days. They returned day after day to comment and like. We didn't expect this degree of response. We were mostly doing this to pass the time of being stuck away from the world.

Most of the posts in this project were tagged with the phrase #CoronaEugenics. While not exactly the trendiest of phrases, we felt it was an important one because of the historical moment in which we found ourselves. It seemed all too apparent to us that the political landscape around the coronavirus was steeped in eugenics. People talked about the virus as something that was "only" dangerous to the elderly and the disabled. Black, Latinx, and Indigenous communities were heavily impacted and not enough attention has been directed to the needs of these communities. Our country has failed us all and blames us for having health issues—some of which have already almost resulted in our death—and so we may as well die. We know that many of the comorbidities that people experience are direct results of social oppression; social determinants of health tell us that discrimination kills. Yet our deaths will be and are being deemed reasonable or acceptable because we already have a diagnosis.

At various crisis points in the pandemic, healthcare facilities engaged in rationed care in favor of more able-bodied patients, reserving life-saving equipment for those deemed most likely to survive. Ableist presumptions about quality of life provided a rationale for these decisions. As disabled people, we are not consulted about our experience of our own quality of life; it's an ableist presumption.¹

In a different type of eugenic performance, rather than donning masks to protect vulnerable individuals, people continued to party with reckless abandon. These trends were viscerally grotesque. The violence of these actions will not be forgotten, if we move forward. It was as though society wanted us to die so that they could continue living life as before.

We wanted to contest the notion that vulnerable bodies are disposable. Eugenics has a long and complex history in the world, but at its core is the idea that certain kinds of bodies should be celebrated while others should be extinguished. We wanted to fight this idea by celebrating a disabled body, the very kind of body that modern eugenics deems an acceptable loss in a pandemic. We needed to communicate in words and images that disabled bodies were worthy. Not only of care, but also as sites of joy and pleasure. Out of this need, the Corona Look of the Day project was born.

We must admit that the project was also a product of pandemic boredom. Bethany began documenting her daily outfits as a way to pass the time, taking selfies in the mirror in the early days of lockdown. Sara saw potential in this effort to contest the confines of isolation, in getting dressed up when there was nowhere to go. "Hand me your phone," she insisted, convinced that the aesthetics would improve if she handled the camera while her partner focused on posing.

Each day we set out to capture a fresh look. With makeup and clothing, with creative posing and camera angles, we tried to deliver a look to the internet that spoke of confidence, of disability pride. Accompanying each image was a short essay post that began with a description of the image to clarify the aesthetic to non-sighted audiences (a basic principle of accessibility), followed by a rumination on the pandemic and the importance of loving disability. Pedagogical in nature, these posts were crafted to teach people, both sighted and not, to engage with disability as something that could be appreciated in its own right, instead of as a marker of despair. For example, Bethany frequently flaunted her protruding sternum to highlight how it could be considered an artful difference and not simply a medicalized deformity.

Technically, we grew a lot as the months progressed. We graduated from an iPhone to an exchangeable-lens camera. We learned to edit photos and refine makeup and costuming. We eventually put together a home studio with fabric backdrops. All in all, we composed over 250 photos of which we share a select few here. Following each image is the original social media text in italics.

Project Samples

April 24, 2020



disabethany
4,256 followers

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Corona look of the day: checkered dress laying on the patio ground, stretched in the sun showing off how short I am! Yes, friends I'm just short enough to be magical and def short enough to be a little person. I get the best of many worlds, and the little people world (our community) is pretty damn dope. I need to go back to the conventions and frolic more, on the other side of COVID-19.

When laying in the sun, I think about what I want to do when I am free from quarantine. While travel, domestic and international are calling my wanderlusty soul, I just want to cuddle with friends for days and I kinda hate cuddling. True thing about OIs (my primary diagnosis - osteogenesis imperfecta) is we tend to run hot temperature wise, so cuddle parties and large other piles of people never applied to this sexpert! But after quarantine, I am all in with breaks and maybe a cold compress on my head. Adapt your cuddle!!! .

[#pandemicstyle](#) [#pandemicfashion](#) [#lovemybody](#) [#fuckeugenics](#) [#lovedisability](#) [#sexology](#) [#somaticart](#)
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April 26, 2020



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Corona look of the day: zebra print dress in front of my wheel. Today's image reflects feeling like I'm rolling through some exhausting bs with a bit more clarity and grounding energy. Yay to my wife for providing stability through the storm and for finally being able to reach for soul nourishing books and read them after a comprehensive exam mental shutdown. .

It makes sense that bell hooks would be part of my journey back to me. She has taught me so much about self-love through her emotionally vulnerable work. Returning to her work after journeying through a lot of [#sobriety](#) literature helps me reconceptualize the next stage of my path. I want to know more about what motivated me to keep drowning myself in booze. When it stopped being a tool of liberation and fun and became a tool of my domination. I was trapped with booze, so excavating the whys and the length of time I needed that coping strategy is important now. It is painful and annoying work. A wise friend said that to heal from [#trauma](#) you have to sit in it; to move from addiction, you have to sit with it without medicating the pain to oblivion. I have to sit with this dumpster fire mayhem in me so I can learn how to do so without harming myself via drinking or other forms of self-sabotage. .

Pandemic time is solid time to sit with feelings and books! I'm grateful to have a wife and friends who teach me so much about being human.

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[#pandemicfashion](#) [#pandemicstyle](#) [#wheelchair](#) [#fuckeugenics](#) [#eugenics](#) [#lovedisability](#)
[#pandemicphilosopher](#) [#soberanddisabled](#) [#sobercrip](#) [#boozeless](#) [#alcoholfree](#) [#awakening](#)
[#loveisresistence](#)

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April 28, 2020



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Corona look of the day: monster @sourpussclothing black and white dress on whilst reclining in my wheelchair. My energy level is at near zero, my eyes are heavy and I just want to sleep. I am having a hard time sleeping at night, and a hard time being awake during the day. Even when I am not sleeping, I am not really awake. These past few days have felt like a daze. I'm trying to be gentle with myself and let go of productivity, after taking furious notes on things to explore when lucid. Going to lay down now and dream of sleeping. .

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July 23, 2020



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Corona look of the day: or gratitude and LOVE to my fabulous chosen family, supportive spouse, and means of enhancing my pleasure like the @lovecrave - I love y'all! 💋💕💋

Seated on a table on the patio, I am wearing grey animal print sheer shorts and my favorite black [#FauxFurCoat](#). With no shirt on and my coat covering my nipples, the delicious silver vibrator I love teaching is highlighted between my asymmetrical breasts. Students feel excited to ask me if it's the vesper so we share a pleasure moment in the classroom! I'm completing the look with [#CateyeLiner](#), black ballet slippers, silver hoop earrings, and a glossy pink lip on my somewhat serious face. This is my greatest [#smize](#) to date! It's hard!!! 🙌🔥🙌

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Today, I want to give deep love and gratitude to those who are sustaining my life right now!! My wife of almost 9 years (whoaaaaa!!) and chosen family from various stages of life who help me manage my [#ChronicDepression](#), with some triggered by [#ChronicPain](#), so that I may get through this [#dissertation](#) writing part of [#PhDLife](#). Writing feels often painful to get out and the process is certainly messy AF, so having my co-conspirators being [#AccountabilityPartners](#) and manifesting dreams believers keeps me going! Thanks all of y'all!!! Truly, it takes so many of you to me keep me going, along sex toys enhancing my pleasure to stay as balanced as a can [#MovingForward](#). Much love & gratitude y'all! 💋💕💋

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[#pandemicfashion](#) [#covidart](#) [#queerantime](#) [#disabilityrepresentation](#) [#coatsofinstagram](#) [#coatweek](#)
[#pleasureactivism](#) [#chosenfamily](#) [#queerfamily](#) [#citeblackwomen](#) [#disabilityjustice](#) [#ableism](#)
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August 14, 2020



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disabethany

Corona look of the day: or going Gaga for a day and it feels great!

Seated on the table on the patio, I'm wearing a bikini I have had for awhile. It's a shiny black multi-strapped bikini top matched with black [#boyshorts](#) that have white polka dots, along with [#SkullsandCrossbones](#) on them. I'm wearing my wildest accessory - studded [#epaulets](#) that have simple

pens to attach them, here they are attached with wall adhesive. They are intended to invoke the dramatic artful feel of the impeccable [@ladygaga](#), the first person I have heard sing positively about [#BeingDisabled](#). We danced to her music at our wedding, and [@maria_town](#) cited [#EdgeofGlory](#) in her speech during the ceremony. Gaga is important to our not so bad romance! My make-up is a goth symphony of purples, pinks, blue, and a bit of silver all from the [#ElectricPalette](#) by [@urbandecaycosmetics](#). The dark purple shades on my lips is compliments of [@forbidden_starfruit](#). Check out her podcast - [#DirtyPanties!](#) My hair is pushed back and wet to add further dramatic appeal of the epaulets and dark makeup. They seem they may be protective from [#microaggressions](#) and people coming to close when I'm not sealed away in my house. Yesss, fashion yields power!

My [#PolkaDots](#) cutie theme continues with a switch to a bikini because it's Friday and soon [@sarapalmer4747](#) and I will have a date. This is the truth: ya gotta work on love! 9 years is long enough in marriage to have lost interest in many things, including life, but we still play and chatter like we new lovers! Friday night is one of the most relaxed times of the week for us. I made this a [#GothGirl](#) look because the epaulets screamed: "use me to dominate the viewer!" Naturally, I complied. Hope you get the yummy feeling of being topped, on this fabulous Friday! May we all have time to lick our wounds, celebrate the victories of our work, and most importantly honor surviving the storm of this week!

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September 11, 2020



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94 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or celebrating fabulousity this Friday by breaking down sexual ableism for ya!

Seated on a table in our dining room studio with a black backdrop, I'm wearing an animal print slip dress as a pencil skirt with a black tank and a fab faux fur coat. Keeping with the theme of shiny things bribing me joy, I'm rocking a shimmering skirt with my rose-gold eyeshadow and bronzer. The [#BetsyJohnson](#) 3/4 length sleeve coat is one of my favorite [@ragorama](#) (I miss you soooo!!!) finds, and thank goodness we are moving into little coat season soon for my Libra love of my birth month! I completed the look with my silver [#clitoris](#) pendant, [@stevemadden](#) ballet flats with pearl and sequin ankle straps, along with my usual [#RussianRed](#) lip.

I'm continuing to shine through pain, including with my sequin top that gives it a graphite wet look, along with the twinkle in my mischievous eyes. To celebrate Friday, I wanted to share rationale for my thirst trap

/ sex kitten photos. I'm not just ridiculously comfortable naked (blame it on the Bay Area art projects I did in sex grad school) truly, I work to fight daily against the [#desexualization](#) of [#DisabledPeople](#). Too often social assumptions and myths stemming from [#SexualAbleism](#) entails the tired assumption that those of us with visible disabilities are not interested in sex or capable of being sexual partners. While some disabled people are asexual as a sexual orientation, many of us have and desire robust sex lives. We are so often simply people trying to date, love, and explore pleasure with others in a difficult dating world saturated in systems of power teaching us which people are desirable! Media representation reinforces and perpetuates this image of sexless innocent disabled people. My images with smoldering eyes and living the lingerie life are in protest against these flattening, boring ideas of disability. I enjoy my sexuality and expression. I encourage you to think about who you consider is hot and how disability fits into conceptions of beauty. Desire is political. Cheers to celebrating another Friday! Wishing y'all the best. ❤️

[#covidart](#) [#coronaeugenics](#) [#bodylove](#) [#lovedisability](#) [#loveisresistance](#)

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November 27, 2020



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171 likes

disabethany

Corona look of the day: or celebrating letting go of that which doesn't serve me!

Seated on a table in our studio with a white backdrop, I'm rocking an adorable black bustier romper with white polka dots. I paired the look with [#HollyGolightly](#) inspired make-up, including a peachy shimmering smile and fab pink heels. I'm a lady of queer leisure, never to pass as normative. I'm too queer crip femme

to try. Also, note my silver vibrator hanging on my sternum - the part of my body that I have held the most shame in my life. I wanted to shave it down, cover it implants, hide my body. No longer!

I'm so tired of carrying weight of thinking I could ever be normal. Even if I continued to walk, I would be wobbling with a cane slowly. I bloody hated it - I was too slow, I felt unprotected, and my gait has always been out unbalanced (perfect for a little libra). I'm grateful I gave up walking at 13 years old. Wheels are liberating, never confining. To be able to show off my sternum and feel attractive is a revelation! Here's to living as much of our authentic selves as we discover nuances along the way! 🌟🌟🌟

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Project Reflection

Looking back on these posts, something we remember most was the urgency of needing to post almost daily in the time before the vaccine. While the project continues at a more leisurely pace post-vaccine, the first year of the pandemic was a time in which we felt it was very important to share a celebration of a disabled subject as life-sustaining resistance to the collective acceptance of disabled and elderly death. It was a way to simply get through the day and fight the onslaught of pandemic depression that has impacted so many.

The eugenic discourse of COVID-19—the aggressive apathy about lives lost and the willingness to sacrifice the most vulnerable with ease—continues to be an enraging and exhausting force. This project was designed to be an intervention on the eugenic assumptions about the value of disabled lives. Celebration of disabled bodies is a radical act when dominant discourses continue to deem such bodies expendable.

By promoting disability style and fashion, we wanted to show that disabled people have the right to thrive even in the context of isolation. In a country that continues to be lax about COVID safety protocols, so many disabled people have no other option but to stay home to protect their health. Segregation continues to be enacted on us. At the same time, this time of isolation could be approached as a source of strength and aesthetic delight: Isolation insulates from everyday experiences of ableism, making it easier to focus on the beauty of disability. Above all, we wanted to fight the idea that disabled people are acceptable deaths in COVID times. So strong is this apathy that it feels as though some in power almost want to be rid of disabled people altogether. They wanted us to die, but we chose to look fabulous in resistance instead.²

Notes

1. A few illustrative articles include Bo Chen and Donna Marie McNamara, "Disability Discrimination, Medical Rationing and COVID-19," *Asian Bioethics Review* 12, no. 4 (2020): 511–18, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00147-x> < <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00147-x>> ; and Emily M. Lund, Anjali J. Forber-Pratt, Catherine Wilson, and Linda R. Mona, "The COVID-19 Pandemic, Stress, and Trauma in the Disability Community: A Call to Action," *Rehabilitation*

Psychology 65, no. 4 (2020): 313–22. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000368> <
<https://doi.org/10.1037/rep0000368>>. ↩

2. Earlier in the essay, we mentioned Jillian Mercado <<https://www.instagram.com/jillianmercado/>> (whose Instagram account is linked here) as one important example of a disabled creative who has changed the game for ways we can demand to be viewed. Other examples of fabulous resistance by disabled creators include Sky Cubacub <<https://www.instagram.com/rebirthgarments/>> and Aaron Rose Phillip <https://www.instagram.com/aaron__philip/>. ↩

Author Information

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Sara Palmer is a technologist working at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.

[View all of Sara Palmer's articles.](#)

Bethany Stevens

Bethany Stevens is a queer femme wheelchair-using sexpert & disability consultant completing a doctoral degree in sociology at Georgia State University. Trained as an attorney, as well as with a master of arts in Sexuality Studies, she has a diverse background of interests that ground her sexuality education work in human rights. She has lectured and offered workshops internationally and has taught courses in public health, disability studies, and social work in five states.

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